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Dissuasion and China; Strategic Insights, v. 3 issue 10 (October 2004)

Roberts, Brad

Monterey, California. Naval Postgraduate School

Strategic Insights, V. 3, issue 10 (October 2004)



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Dissuasion and China

Strategic Insights, Volume III, Issue 10 (October 2004)

By [Brad Roberts](#)

Strategic Insights is a monthly electronic journal produced by the [Center for Contemporary Conflict](#) at the [Naval Postgraduate School](#) in Monterey, California. The views expressed here are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NPS, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

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Introduction

Whether China is intended to be simply *an* object of dissuasion or *the primary* object is a matter of continuing conjecture by close readers of the 2001 *Quadrennial Defense Review* (QDR).^[1] In asserting that "well targeted strategy and policy can... dissuade other countries from initiating future military competitions," the QDR suggests that dissuasion can be applied to any country tempted by such a possibility. But the QDR also anticipates the future reemergence of a peer competitor—and though it did not mention China by name, it hinted at the possibility that China might play this role. It observes that "Asia is gradually emerging as a region susceptible to large-scale military competition," and believes "[t]he possibility exists that a military competitor with a formidable resource base will emerge in the region." Dissuading China from opting for a peer adversarial relationship with the United States seems like an altogether different challenge from that of dissuading smaller states from competing selectively for military advantage with, for example, WMD-tipped missiles.

In considering the means and ends of dissuading China, it is important also to be cognizant of the subtle shifts in strategic thinking evident in Bush Administration documents. The QDR's gloomy view of the likely return of peer adversarial relations among major powers is not matched in the *National Security Strategy* in September 2002, and this fact seems to have some big implications for how to dissuade. To be sure, the NSS echoes the logic of dissuasion in its promise that the United States shall have military forces "second to none," and anticipates "[o]ur forces will be strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States."^[2]

But the NSS was conceived and written in the post-9/11 environment and thus at a time when President Bush was actively assembling and leading a "coalition of the willing" to prosecute the Global War on Terrorism. In response to the President's call to "choose sides," China's leaders chose cooperation. Since then the administration has worked to explore the possibilities (and limits) of strategic cooperation with China. Moreover, the President then embraced the argument of Condoleezza Rice and others that the major powers today have an "historic opportunity to break the destructive pattern of great power rivalry" and to cooperate more deeply on "constructive agendas" based on common interests, common responsibilities, and increasingly common

values.[3]

In this post-9/11 vision, dissuasion's objectives vis-à-vis potential peer adversaries have become more subtle. On the one hand, there is the pre-9/11 objective of de-motivating the competitive tendencies of a potential future adversary. On the other hand, there is the post-9/11 objective of motivating continued and indeed deeper partnership. In short, the US-China strategic relationship has grown more complex than the 2001 QDR and its earlier logic of dissuasion suggest. China is a potential adversary. Indeed, it is a potential enemy in war over Taiwan, and perhaps elsewhere. But today it is also a strategic partner. And the potential to deepen this partnership is strongly endorsed by the nation's political leadership. Dissuasion must work for the best, even as it helps to hedge against the worst in future major power relations.

These subtle shifts in the underlying logic of dissuasion, and the apparent tension between DoD and White House views, complicate the task of implementing an effective dissuasion strategy. As the QDR argued, dissuasion can be achieved by "maintaining or enhancing advantages in some key areas of military capability." This may be effective for de-motivating certain types of military competitions. But it may likewise motivate other responses, whether asymmetric military ones or a general desire to compete in order not to be taken advantage of. Achievement of deeper partnership may instead require restraint in the development of some key military capabilities—a restraint that seems contrary to the original intent of the QDR.

How can this logic be applied to China? How can dissuasion be operationalized—which is to say, how can U.S. military forces be postured to achieve the intended strategic objectives? This *Strategic Insight* provides some initial insights to these issues, in the hope of stimulating broader discussion and debate. It begins with a discussion of how best to define the goals of dissuasion vis-à-vis China. It next considers how to structure U.S. strategic forces—defined as all elements of the New Triad—with the aim of achieving dissuasion. It closes with some observations on implementation challenges.[4]

The Objectives of Dissuasion

Within the U.S. defense community, there appears to be a good deal of confusion about the goal of dissuasion vis-à-vis China. An informal survey of the DoD community conducted in 2004 uncovered the following opinions about the objectives of dissuasion of China:

- Avoiding a cold-war like nuclear arms race;
- Preventing China's emergence as a peer political power;
- Preventing China's emergence as a peer military competitor;
- Deterring a PLA "grab" of Taiwan;
- Stalling China's force modernization;
- De-motivating China's efforts to compete with US BMD deployments;
- Inhibiting PRC strategic and foreign policy responses to US BMD;
- Inhibiting a future PRC choice to seek to become the dominant nuclear power in Eurasia;
- Structuring the strategic nuclear relationship with China so that it reinforces trend toward cooperation and concert described in NSS; and
- Collapsing Communist Party rule in China.

Most of these seem well wide of the marks set out by the QDR and NSS. Some confuse dissuasion with deterrence. Others describe a political objective seemingly not intended by administration leaders. The QDR emphasizes decisions to initiate *future* military competitions. This seems to imply de-motivating a decision that might be made but hasn't yet been made. In the case of China, this logic suggests that the objective of dissuasion is de-motivation of a

redirection of Chinese economic, military, and social assets toward major military confrontation with the United States, as part of a decision to confront the United States as an adversarial peer.

China, like most every other country in the world, has neither the technology nor the wealth to compete with the United States as a peer on the conventional battlefield. It certainly desires the development of selective advantages in a war with the United States over Taiwan—and is aggressively pursuing new capabilities toward that end, though in a severely resource-constrained setting. But wholesale transformation of the People's Liberation Army to confront the United States militarily in the way the Soviet military did has not been a priority of the Chinese leadership (military modernization has been the lowest priority of the "four modernizations" for decades), and the political and economic factors that would permit such a transformation of Chinese priorities are difficult to conceive for the foreseeable future.

If not on the conventional battlefield, then where else might China opt for competition for peer benefit? Perhaps in the strategic realm: for decades China has fielded a nuclear force structure far inferior to that of the United States, both quantitatively and qualitatively. But it is now modernizing that force. This modernization has brought a significant expansion of its theater ballistic missile force. And this raises a question about the nature of the future intercontinental force that might be seen as necessary to China's purposes. From the perspective of dissuasion, it is important to distinguish between the current trajectory of Chinese force modernization and a possible future decision to depart from that trajectory and intensify US-PRC military competition in service of its ambition to emerge as a peer adversary to the United States.

China's force modernization plans are, unfortunately, something of a mystery. China has a long tradition of military secrecy and indeed deception, and Chinese experts believe that transparency in the nuclear realm, as in other realms, only serves to underscore its weakness and thus embolden its adversaries.

But its present trajectory of force developments may be extrapolated from available information.^[5] Its modernization seems driven principally by a vision of nuclear sufficiency in terms of securing PRC interests in a Taiwan conflict under the nuclear shadow. China has been working to regain confidence in its nuclear posture by addressing concerns about the survivability and effectiveness of its forces. It is working to plug two gaps: one is between the strategic requirement to "absorb the first blow" and the operational capacity to counterattack, and the other is between the requirement to win in "local wars under high-tech conditions" and current conventional operational capacity. U.S. ballistic missile defense (BMD) has had an impact on Chinese perceptions of the effectiveness of their strategic force, but it is not the sole driver of modernization and its actual impact on future force characteristics remains uncertain.

Deflecting China's modernization of its forces in a way that keeps pace incrementally with the challenges to force effectiveness posed by BMD appears beyond the intended scope of dissuasion. Here the intention is already well formed, and the decision long made and resourced. Indeed, the political commitment to the preservation of a viable strategic deterrent appears to be deep and abiding, not least because China's leaders and strategists have expressed grave fears about a more assertive America freed by Soviet collapse to exercise military power in service of its interests and values.

Is there a potential departure from this trajectory that seems the appropriate intended "target" of dissuasion? Is there a decision not yet made but potentially on a future agenda that would bring new military competition with the United States and presage a peer adversarial relationship?

There appears to be. Rather than pace the development of U.S. BMD with incremental

improvements to its strategic forces, China might opt to race the New Triad envisioned in the Bush Administration's 2002 Nuclear Posture Review. What might drive such a decision? And what would it entail?

Such a decision could be driven by the perception that incremental improvements to its strategic forces will not suffice to safeguard Chinese interests in a time of confrontation with the United States. Chinese incrementalism is informed by an expectation of incremental improvements to the U.S. posture. It is informed also by a belief that a little nuclear leverage over the United States will go a long way toward inducing U.S. restraint during a confrontation over Taiwan. But there are reasons to think that Chinese planners may no longer see incrementalism as sufficient. Future deployment of New Triad capabilities could be seen by Chinese force planners as highly challenging to China's strategic posture. Such deployment seems to promise splendid conventional strike capabilities that would make certain forms of threatened PRC nuclear retaliation less credible. The ambition for improved nuclear strike capabilities seems to promise a U.S. ability to put some key PRC assets at new risk. The ambition for improved ISR (intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance) seems to mean that the United States will be able to find the targets in China it needs at whatever level of escalation it chooses. BMD means that the United States will be able to run new risks in defense of Taiwan. Moreover, the administration's defense transformation agenda promises to open up the gap between the People's Liberation Army and the U.S. military faster than China's purchase of RMA (revolution in military affairs) technologies can close it. Lastly, U.S. strategic behavior post-9/11 seems to call into question the common Chinese expectation that the America is a complacent and casualty-averse society that can be made to run in fear when its nose is bloodied.

If Chinese planners come to see incrementalism as ill-serving their interest in competing with developments in the U.S. posture, do they have a realistic alternative? Some Americans worry that China might choose the course that the Soviets chose in the 1960s—to build massive counterforce warfighting forces in pursuit of overwhelming nuclear advantages over the United States and the West. But there seems to be no voice for this option in China. Many look at the Soviet Union's military investment choices of the 1960s and 1970s as foolish and ultimately crippling; indeed, Chinese analysts often credit the United States with masterminding Soviet collapse by tricking it into an expensive arms race. It is difficult to find even a hint of Chinese interest in nuclear counterforce warfighting strategies of the kind that drove such large force deployments by the United States and Soviet Union during the Cold War.

What then might "race the New Triad" mean, operationally? It could mean a sprint, not a race in perpetuity. Chinese experts seem to accept New Triad capabilities as inevitable in America's future strategic posture, but as likely to be a decade or more in reaching the field. In the interim, China might move aggressively to improve its abilities to penetrate U.S. missile defenses; to target U.S. forces in theater, U.S. bases in the region, and the U.S. homeland; while also strengthening its abilities to protect its own key assets—what Chinese analysts call "nuclear defense." It would do so with the hope that this race-not-pace strategy would deprive the United States of the confidence that it can prevail at low or no cost in a confrontation over Taiwan under the nuclear shadow. Then, conceivably, Beijing might create a crisis over Taiwan and employ or threaten to employ those capabilities with the hope of exploiting the advantages it has maximized but will soon lose (as U.S. New Triad capabilities reach the field). Thus the notionally conceivable departure trajectory for Chinese force modernization entails a decision to move aggressively to strengthen its own capacities for nuclear and non-nuclear strategic strike and for protection of its forces and other assets.

This line of argument implies that the proper and necessary objective of dissuasion is demotivation of a future Chinese choice to abandon the incrementalist force modernization trajectory in favor of a sprint to limited nuclear defense and its exploitation in a Taiwan crisis of

Beijing's making. Think of this as a choice between pacing U.S. BMD and racing the New Triad. How can dissuasion of this possible Chinese choice for more intensive competition be achieved? And how can this be done in a way that also motivates deeper partnership and strategic cooperation?

Structuring U.S. Strategic Forces for Dissuasion

From a conceptual perspective, there are at least five different possible ways of structuring U.S. strategic forces in service of the objectives of dissuasion. There are strengths and weaknesses of each.

- The first of these is to rely on large numbers of deployed nuclear strike forces. This helps to "raise the barrier to entry" to competition and thus helps to dissuade the decision to compete in the first place. As one influential study has argued, it might be useful to impress China with "greater, rather than fewer weapons... Authoritarian states and leaders seem to place special emphasis on larger numbers, perhaps because... dictators find in large numbers a promise or manifestation of the unlimited force they want to exercise."[\[6\]](#)

From the perspective of dissuasion, this approach seems not particularly promising. Even on the race-not-pace trajectory, China seems unmotivated to compete with the United States with thousands of deployed intercontinental strike forces. Of course, very deep cuts in the U.S. arsenal could have the effect of motivating Chinese thinking down this route. Moreover, U.S. reliance on large numbers of deployed weapons for dissuasion seems to suggest that the relevant mode of Chinese competition would be offense-offense, when in fact it would be offense-defense. In other words, China's thinking about the virtues of a rapid medium-term build up of its longer-range strike systems would likely be shaped significantly by expectations of U.S. ability to pace or out-race such a Chinese build up with its own BMD deployments. If it cannot out-race the US deployment of BMD, why even consider the race-not-pace trajectory?

- A second way to structure U.S. strategic forces for dissuasion is to rely on responsiveness. Recall the Nuclear Posture Review, which calls for a responsive force capable of meeting any contingency with overwhelming augmented forces as well as a responsive infrastructure capable of out-racing and out-innovating an adversary on some course of competition chosen by that adversary. This appears to be the notion governing current thinking about how best to dissuade a potential future Russian decision to resume strategic competition and reemerge as a U.S. peer adversary.

From the perspective of dissuasion of China, this approach seems also to fall short. It too relies on the offense-offense paradigm when it's the offense-defense competition that seems to bear on the dissuasion objective. Moreover, augmentation forces may play a role in deterring PRC aggression against Taiwan but have no apparent relevance to dissuasion.

- A third way to structure U.S. forces for dissuasion is to rely on "defeat." Think of this as the model for dissuasion of the "rogues," which emphasizes fielding now the capabilities necessary to escape a deterrence relationship with WMD-armed aggressors and composing the force so that its advantages are increasingly overwhelming and obviously so.

From the perspective of dissuasion of China, this approach has two problems. One is that it imposes on China the military and economic costs of a choice to compete with the United States even in the absence of such a choice. What possible benefits would there be to China of restraint

in such a circumstance? The other problem is that dramatic improvements in US warfighting advantages of the kind associated with an obviously overwhelming posture would be widely interpreted in China as signaling U.S. intent to exploit those advantages in a crisis precipitated by Washington to change the status quo over Taiwan. This could help motivate the race and war that dissuasion is intended to help prevent. It would certainly sour the political climate for cooperation. Moreover, even if this approach were effective in dissuading China from making the race-not-pace choice, it would seem to work against the assurance of U.S. allies and friends that U.S.-PRC strategic relations will not become so hostile as to engulf them in a new global divide.

- A fourth way to structure U.S. forces for dissuasion is to rely on selective competition. This is a direct analogy to the anti-Soviet competitive strategies approach of the 1980s.^[7] This takes a long-term view of de-motivation in seeking to change China's strategic personality so that it never chooses to play a global counterbalancing role to the United States—and doing so by pursuing regime change as the ultimate objective of dissuasion. By this logic, the United States would compete selectively to gain wider U.S. military advantages in areas where the PRC must compete but at devastating cost and in any case could not hope to win—all somehow leading to the collapse of communist rule.

From the perspective of dissuasion of China, this approach too has problems. The PRC of 2004 is not the Soviet Union of 1984. Indeed, the propositions that competitive strategies brought about Soviet collapse and can have the same effect on communist rule in China are hotly contested. Plus, this approach seems to work against the political objective of deeper partnership. Moreover, stimulating arms races to avoid them seems illogical. And this approach would also work against the assurance of friends and allies. Recall here that the focus is on competition for strategic nuclear advantage; the competitive strategies approach may have more utility as a tool for de-motivating certain types of competition at the conventional military level (a topic not explored here).

- The fifth approach is to rely on mutual contingent restraint. In this approach, the United States would maintain and where necessary develop the capacity to out-race China if Beijing chooses race-not-pace. But it would also exercise restraint in exchange for Chinese restraint, modernizing its strategic force selectively in a way that would not impose significant new burdens on China and its ability to protect its vital interests—in exchange for an understanding that China's modernization is proceeding in a way that would not impose significant new burdens on the United States and its ability to protect its vital interests. On BMD, dissuasion would seem to require a mutual understanding that the United States will maintain an ability to deploy defenses more quickly than the PRC can deploy offenses but that it refrains from such deployments in exchange for PRC restraint in the military and political realms.

From the perspective of dissuasion, this approach has at least one significant problem. Beijing may not believe that the United States is being any more restrained than technology and budgets dictate—and perhaps covertly pursues escape from avowed restraints. This approach also works against the administration's stated intent to maintain an open-ended, unconstrained pursuit of multilayered BMD—and it may be that this policy cannot be squared with the ambition of dissuading China.

In sum, there are various options for structuring U.S. strategic forces with the aim of dissuading China. Few of those options appear promising in delivering both the desired strategic restraint by China and the desired political cooperation. The fifth option appears to come closest to the thinking and policy of the Bush White House, but runs afoul of some other important U.S. interests.

Conclusion

Dissuasion is a hedging strategy. The United States hopes to hedge against the possibility that China might seek to compete as a peer adversary by so posturing itself so that China sees no possible advantage down that path. The challenge of hedging strategies is that sometimes they create the situation they are intended to prevent. The wrong dissuasion strategy may motivate China to compete for strategic advantage over Taiwan. The wrong dissuasion strategy may sour the climate of political cooperation now prevailing between Washington and Beijing, and lead to more confrontational Chinese policies on regional security, weapons proliferation, and terrorism. Rather than make an uncertain security environment more predictable, the wrong dissuasion strategies may increase the likelihood of significant strategic surprise, in the form of major departures from U.S. preferences in the behaviors of China (and possibly also U.S. friends and allies as a result of failures of assurance).

The right dissuasion strategy begins with a thorough assessment of U.S. interests. It requires plans for the development of U.S. strategic and conventional forces tailored to the requirements of dissuasion. But dissuasion cannot be achieved by force structure alone. Overcoming Chinese suspicions of U.S. strategic intent requires an element of assurance as well, something that can flow only from the political dialogue and foreign policy process, something that ought to be equally valuable in addressing U.S. suspicions of Chinese intent.

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About the Author

Dr. Brad Roberts is a member of the research staff at the Institute for Defense Analyses in Alexandria, Virginia. He joined IDA in September 1995, having served previously for 12 years at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC, with twin appointments as research fellow in international security studies and as editor of *The Washington Quarterly*. He is the author or editor of more than 100 publications, including journal articles in periodicals such as *International Security*, *Survival*, and *The Washington Quarterly*, and numerous books. He has a BA from Stanford University, an MSc from the London School of Economics and Political Science, and a PhD from Erasmus University, Rotterdam. The views expressed here are his own.

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